

Questar s blending plan may save Utahns money

It also offers hope that a decades-old controversy may be winding down

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After February 2008, Utahns living along the Wasatch Front no longer may have to pay about \$6 million per year to help Questar Gas process its natural gas so it can burn safely in their homes.

The utility intends to forgo the processing charges when it files its next semi-annual rate change request within the next week or so.

"We now have another [more economical] way to guarantee the quality of the gas that flows onto our system," Questar Gas spokesman Chad Jones said.

Questar Pipeline, a sister company of Questar Gas, recently added pipelines serving the natural gas-producing areas in eastern Utah, Jones explained. Those new connections can bring gases with different heat values together so they can be blended to produce a fuel that will burn safely in Utah's appliances.

"When we first [saw the need] to start processing natural gas . . . the [pipeline] infrastructure of the state was a lot different than it is now," Jones said.

Questar Gas' decision to stop processing offers the latest glimmer of hope a controversy that began more than a decade ago over who should pay such costs - the company or its customers - may be winding down.

The dispute reaches back to the late 1980s.

Prior to that time, Questar was supplying natural gas that had a higher heat content than the natural gas used in the rest of the country. In the late 1980s, however, Questar Pipeline started to accept methane produced from coal beds near Price that had a heat content similar to that used elsewhere. Because the coal-bed methane was different, it needed processing to raise the heat value before it could burn safely.

After years of debate, setbacks and legal maneuvering - one Utah Supreme Court decision resulted in the utility refunding \$29 million in processing charges - Questar Gas finally received approval from the state to collect part of the processing costs from customers.

Those charges amounted to about 50 cents per month for each Utah household. They started showing up on customer bills in February 2006.

Utility watchdogs Claire Geddes and Roger Ball, a former director of the Utah Committee of Consumer Services, though, are challenging the state's decision at the Utah Supreme Court.

Ball said Questar Gas' new blending plan raises the question whether there is any merit to the utility's Green Sticker Program. "If they can now blend natural gas so it can be used safely, why would people need to have their appliances adjusted?" he asked.

Questar Gas in 1998 launched a 10-year campaign that became known as the Green Sticker Program to educate consumers about the necessity of having appliances adjusted so they could safely handle lower heat-value gas once the processing ended in 2008.

The idea was that during that 10-year-period many of the water heaters and furnaces in Utah homes would be replaced with new units already set to handle the lower Btu gas. Utahns who didn't need to have their appliances replaced could pay to have them adjusted.

Jones said Questar Gas' decision to use blending extends the time frame for Utahns to have their appliances checked. "We plan to continue blending until we're confident all appliances can safely burn the natural gas we'll be supplying," he said.

He said Questar's goal is to eventually supply natural gas that has the same heat content as the natural gas used nationally. Questar charges its customers based on the heat content of the natural gas they use, not on the quantity.

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Helping yourself

Tips for furnace maintenance and safety:

- * Clean or replace filters monthly
- * Never store flammable or combustible materials near a furnace or water heater
- * Keep all combustion-air openings, cold-air returns and heat registers clear
- * Blower doors always should be securely in place
- * Check venting to ensure it is clear
- * Secure water heaters to prevent tipping in case of earthquake

Source: Questar Gas